

CRC- A HANDHOLDING AND REJUVANATING SPACE FOR CHILDREN AT THE TIME OF CRISIS

Here is a child, who always rose to the occasion, and faced any challenges.

Her name is *Muthumari*, and is 12 years old. She hails from *Keela Eeral* village in *Kovilpatti* cluster. She is studying 6th standard. Her father *Aathilingam* (63), has studied only up to 3rd standard. Her mother *Mahalakshmi* (31), has also studied only up to 3rd standard. *Muthumari* has two younger sisters, *Bhuvaneshwari*, studying 4th standard, and *Muthulakshmi* studying 2nd standard. The family lives in a rented house.

Aathilingam, used to work as a mason earning Rs.400/- per day. Given the poor economic condition, both the parents had the compulsion to work for sustaining the family. However, mother *Mahalakshmi* cannot attend to work regularly as she has been suffering from Epileptic fits since she was a child. Episodes of Epileptic fits came unforeseen. *Mahalakshmi* says, “Whenever I get the fit, I won’t be able to move a muscle of mine for at least 3 days.” Seeing the difficulties faced by the mother, *Muthumari* has learned to cook. She also has learnt to take care of her siblings. She will do all the domestic chores whenever her mother falls sick. *Muthumari* virtually has become the caretaker of the family. But she hasn’t failed to learn a hobby. In her free time, she would go to her neighbour and learn how to string flowers. Flower-stringing can get her money.

“At home, I help my mother. I study only when I am at school and at the CRC,” says *Muthumari*. She joined the CRC when she was 8 years old. Facilitator Selvi says, “She is a bright student who shows interest in all the activities in the CRC. She is also very kind to other children.”

After joining the CRC, *Muthumari* developed a new set of hobbies. “I learned many things at the CRC. I learned to make butterflies, masks, and sunflowers using paper during art camps. I learned theatre from *Selvam anna*. *Nagaraj anna* used to teach us drawing. I love taking pictures using a DSLR camera. I got many friends to play with.” Whenever she feels low, she is in the habit of picking up a paper and starts crafting some artifact.



(*Muthumari* making craft with her friend at CRC)

Aathilingam who is a mason, even during lockdown somehow managed to go to work to earn that Rs.400/- per day. This was barely enough for the family. As the family was struggling through, one day unfortunately *Aathilingam* met with an accident. He fell down in a construction site and had multiple fractures on his right hand. It was heart-rending. Ever since, he could not attend work. This led to further worsening of the family's economic situation.

Muthumari broke down while talking about the incident. But this terrible set back didn't stop *Muthumari*. With whatever skill she had in flower-stringing, she went to work in the flower market taking help from her neighbour. *Muthumari* left for work by 9 o'clock in the morning, and came back only at 4 o'clock in the evening. And then again, she would work from 6 o'clock to 8 o'clock in the night. She could only earn Rs.50/- a day. It was the only source of income for the entire family. "I didn't like going to work, I could not play like other children in my neighbourhood. I also use to feel tired," says *Muthumari*.

"The gap available between 4 pm and 6 pm, was the only time I felt happy as I went to the CRC." Says *Muthumari*.

"My daughter went to work and saved us", her father breaks down saying. "Ever since the accident happened, I could not go to work. Understanding the situation, she decided to go to work. She even bought me two liters of medicinal oil using her meagre wage. It was for my broken hand"

Muthumari worked in the flower market for nearly 4 months and helped her family. Only during that time, to make things worse, her mother got a severe attack of epileptic fits and she had to be admitted to the government hospital. *Muthumari* now had to look after her two younger sisters. Her father had to attend to her mother in the hospital. *Muthumari's* savings helped buying medicines.



(*Muthumari* with her parents)

CRC served as a space for *Muthumari* to divert herself from stress and worries.

"I used to share everything with my facilitator *Selvi Akka*. She used to give me moral support. I draw and do some craft work at home whenever I used to feel stressed. I used to be the happiest person during Art camps and tours where I happen to meet and play with many friends, and learn something new."

Muthumari is also called *Mayil* (meaning peacock). After coming to know about her situation, I with field coordinators visited her parents and tried to persuade them not to send her to work. I was astonished about how she was able to take the family's responsibilities at such a young age.

"CEDAR's relief materials were very helpful during those times," said *Muthumari's* mother. "We stopped sending our daughter go to work", Her father said. "I, fortunately, got a job in a hotel as a watchman." It brought me a sense of relief.



(*Muthumari*)

"I now feel happy that I can spend more time with my friends and my sisters," says *Muthumari*. When asked what you want to do in the future, she says, "I want to become a doctor!" When asked why, she says, "Because I will be able to treat the elderly and the poor who could not afford it".

Muthumari's is an example of how children develop extraordinary resilience at the face of unforeseen mishaps visit the immediate family. They develop unbelievable capacity for problem-solving. But what makes her really special is her positivity. Her ability to use art and craft, and the company of her friends to channelise her frustrations is amazing. Above all, stands her hope and a noble dream. CRC did not fail to provide the much needed space to rejuvenate her spirit.

Ponkundram.

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